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ABSTRACT

Addressing the negative attitudes of social work students toward research, this paper describes a model for teaching research methods. The model, developed in the setting of a rural social work program, emphasizes participatory experience, "learning through writing." The method is based on the assumption that writing facilitates learning. The major assignment for students in the research class was to complete a proposal for a program evaluation, suitable for inclusion in a program proposal grant application. Students were taught the writing principles of audience identification, microthemes, evaluation criteria, and peer evaluation. Students completed ten microthemes, short essays typed on a five by eight inch note card. The microthemes addressed a specific research concept presented in class, and were combined to constitute the main body of the proposal. At the beginning of the semester, students were given the criteria that would be used to evaluate the final paper. In the research class, students exchanged drafts of their papers and critiqued the papers using evaluation guidelines. A survey administered at the end of the semester to the social work students (N=34) found 79% of the students indicating the mini assignments "very useful," and 62% indicating they would be interested in enrolling in further research or statistics courses. In addition, instructors had fewer complaints about grades and received better teaching evaluations. This paper contains 22 references. (KS)

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Teaching Research Methods Through Writing

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Teaching Research Methods Through Writing

Abstract: A number of problems have been encountered in the teaching of research within the social work curriculum. A model for teaching social work research methods is presented. The model involves a participatory experience, "learning through writing," that incorporates the principles of audience identification, microthemes, evaluation criteria, and peer evaluation. The outcomes from using this approach in research methods classes are positive, although further outcome evaluation is recommended.

Teaching Research Methods Through Writing

Problems of teaching research

The role of research methods in the social work curriculum has been the subject of considerable discussion over the years. Studies have consistently indicated that both undergraduates and graduates have failed to see research as useful, valid, important or relevant (Rosenblatt & Kirk 1981; Lawson & Berleman, 1982; Siegel, 1983). A number of recommendations have been made in order to counter what appears to be a continuing trend of negative attitudes among students about research. These recommendations have included social work faculty teaching research courses (Smith, DeWeaver & Kilpatrick, 1986); integrating research content throughout the curriculum (Bogal & Singer, 1981); rearranging the sequence in which research concepts are taught (Kirk & Kolevzon, 1978); focussing on a consumer research model (Kraybill, Iacono-Harris & Bason, 1982) and strategies for the greater integration of research into practice content (Reinherz, Regan & Anastas, 1983; Siegel & Fortune, 1982; Barth, 1984).

These recommendations provide important guidelines and models for the overall improvement of the structure and outcome of the research sequence. Nevertheless, the research instructor, particularly in undergraduate programs, finds him or herself confronted by a series of barriers that often impedes the implementation of many of these

recommendations. First, there is usually a serious time constraint. Unlike other social work sequences, the research sequence is often required to be taught in one course. Second, faculty often have strengths in practice rather than in research. Consequently, even if on paper the curriculum attempts to integrate research and practice, in reality, this is hard to implement.

In addition, and in part a result of these two barriers, the teaching techniques used in other classes are often not appropriate in the research class. Guest speakers with adequate experience of, and enthusiasm for, research are in short supply. The use of media such as films is almost impossible. The straightforward presentation of concepts even when carefully explained in the context of practice examples tends to confuse and panic or, at best, lose the interest of the already resistive audience. Participatory learning would appear to be the most effective. But the time constraint results in making the completion of an actual research project hard to accomplish. Even if completed in conjunction with the field experience, supervision for such a project is often hard to obtain in many agencies, particularly in rural areas.

This paper describes a model for teaching research methods, and involves a participatory experience, "learning through writing." A preliminary evaluation of its application in a rural BSW program indicates some satisfactory results in imparting to students basic research concepts,

even where time and research supervision are limited commodities.

Learning through writing model

Usually, writing is used only as an instrument to evaluate students' learning, rather than as a means of learning. According to Emig (1977), writing allows us to manipulate our thoughts, because the writing makes our thoughts visible and concrete and allows us to interact and modify them. Emig stresses that writing, like no other thinking process, helps us develop a train of thought thoroughly and clearly. Speaking also involves composing, in addition to acting as a means of communication. Although writing helps us compose even better because we can manipulate our compositions on paper in addition to manipulating them in our head. From this idea of writing as a cognitive process, it is easy to understand that writing is learning.

There is accumulated evidence that learning through writing can be particularly effective for understanding and learning technical fields not usually associated with writing, such as mathematics (Watson, 1980), finance Drenk,1982), and engineering (Skerl, 1980). If useful in these fields, learning through writing would be expected to be particularly appropriate for teaching research methods.

The premise of learning through writing underlies the writing-across-the-curriculum movement (Griffin,1982), and

in recent years a number of principles of its application have emerged. Some of these principles will be described here along with an explanation of how they have been used to facilitate the learning of research concepts in an undergraduate research methods course. These principles include: the specification of the audience; the use of microthemes; specification of grading criteria and peer evaluation.

The major assignment for the students in the research class is to complete a proposal for a program evaluation. Many of the students will find themselves confronted with this type of task shortly after graduation, a situation not uncommon for BSW generalist graduates in rural areas. Thus, this is a very practical and not simply academic exercise. The students are instructed that the proposal plan is to be suitable for practical application and for inclusion in a program proposal grant application.

Knowing your audience

One principle of writing as learning and a behavioral difference between skilled and unskilled writers is the importance of knowing your audience, and shaping the writing for that audience (Walvoord & Smith, 1982). Consequently the students were told about the audience for which they were writing. For the program evaluation proposal, there would be an administrator with substantive knowledge of the problem area for which the program proposal, and

evaluation, is being made. If possible, an individual who has experienced reviewing proposals is invited to talk to the class in order to more fully familiarize the students with their potential audience.

Microthemes

A second principle of learning through writing employed in the research class is the use of microthemes. The microtheme is a short essay that can be typed on one five by eight inch note card. "Capable of being graded rapidly and thus adaptable to large classes, microthemes can be designed to promote growth in specified thinking skills" (Bean, Drenk, & Lee, 1982, p. 27). The focus of the microthemes in the research course is to require the students learn to apply research concepts they had read about and heard presented in class to a "real" problem.

Students are required to complete ten microthemes. These are then combined towards the end of the semester to constitute the main body of the proposal. Each microtheme addresses a specific research concept, for example, research design, defining outcome measures, etc. Each topic is presented and discussed in class before the microtheme is completed. Both good and bad examples from previous classes are demonstrated. This discussion and distribution of examples not only provides important feedback to the students, but also gives some examples of the practical application of the concepts while they are being discussed

in class. Grading can be done speedily; a glimpse at the papers discloses whether or not the students have grasped the concept. If there is doubt, a "see me" is the only note made. Extensive notes on papers appear to be ineffective as a method of instruction (Lees, 1982). Harris (1979) concludes that "the amount of useful information students derive from a graded paper, above a certain minimum level, is in inverse proportion to the amount of instructor notation on the page" (p.61).

Evaluation criteria

After surveying the current research on the evaluation of writing, McAllister (1982) concluded that it was essential to specify to the students the criteria by which the paper would be evaluated. Thus, students are told at the beginning of the semester the criteria that will be used to evaluate their final paper, as research findings indicate that content and structure should be given at least as much, if not more, weight than mechanics or grammar (Butler, 1980). The criteria by which the papers are graded include organization, accuracy in defining the research concepts, accuracy in applying the research concepts feasibility of the study in addition to grammar. All are equally weighted.

Peer evaluation

A final writing principle used is peer evaluation. The

rationale for soliciting students' responses from other students' papers is based on research that indicates that peer responses to writing can be just as effective as the instructor's. In particular, students need responses at the early stages of their writing rather than as a final judgement (Thomson, 1981). This can be provided by peer evaluation in addition to the instructor's feedback on the microthemes. In the research class, students exchange drafts of their papers in pairs and a class session is devoted to critiquing, using the evaluation guidelines. In addition to providing some constructive comments, this process encourages the students to write drafts, rather than present drafts as final papers, and also gives the students experience in analyzing research proposals.

Outcomes

The results of incorporating these learning through writing principles into the research course have examined in a rudimentary manner. Although this examination was preliminary, and by no means conclusive, the results suggest some promise with this method of teaching research, at least within a BSW program. A survey administered at the end of the semester to the social work students enrolled in the Fall 1988 research course (N = 34) resulted in 79 percent of the students finding mini assignments "very useful." As an indicator of the success of course in stimulating interest in research, the students were asked about their willingness

to enroll in further research and/or statistics courses. Sixty-two percent stated they would be interested in enrolling in either or both of these types of courses.

In addition to the results of this survey, other observations have also indicated some success of the writing through learning principles and include:

a. Lessening anxiety among the students regarding learning the new concepts, and so increasing their comprehension. Many claim that this makes their major assignment "manageable."

b. It allows the instructor to keep track of whether the students are grasping the material and in identifying who needs extra help without adding a more heavy load to the instructor.

c. Faced with having to write about the concepts each week, the students raise questions more readily in class and appear to pay more attention to the material.

d. There are less complaints about grades, presumably because the evaluation criteria are explicit and the students critique each other's papers.

e. Teaching evaluations have improved markedly in the research class.

Conclusion

One approach to of tackling the challenge of teaching the social work research class is to adopt some principles

of teaching writing, based on the assumption that through writing, learning increases and is facilitated. Although the results appear positive, there is clearly a need for the systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach to teaching research methods.

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